

Text-Based Teaching: Theory and Practice

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“ ... the process we are interested in is that of producing and understanding text in some context of situation ...” (Halliday & Hasan, 1985, p. 14).

In this paper, I am interested in how our experiences of texts relate to teaching languages. Our starting point is texts. We live with language as texts, not as lists of vocabulary items or grammar. We are familiar with many texts. We use texts every day for lots of different purposes. We have fun with texts. We make and break relationships with texts. We get work and tasks done with texts. We record and relate experiences with texts. We make arrangements with texts. We pass our time in conversation—with texts. We worship with texts. We honor people with texts. We humiliate people with texts. We make war and we make peace with texts. We teach with texts. We learn texts. We are constantly texting, tweeting, podding, podcasting, word processing, Twittering, FaceBooking, and kindling—all with texts. We know texts. We know the importance of texts. So what is it about texts? Why do we fill our lives with texts? Why are there so many texts?

Teaching languages

There is a continuing tradition in language teaching, which separates vocabulary and grammar from texts. Language is treated as a series of objects, which like numerous Lego bricks are assembled for communication. Instruction commences with the introduction of grammatical objects for learners to recognize as parts for assembling into pre-arranged sentence patterns. The rules for assembling parts into patterns need to be learned. The sequencing of grammatical items and the lists of words is unrelated the texts learners might need for communication. Grammatical rules and forms are illustrated in decontextualized sentences or dialogues. The grammar is practiced repetitively in exercises without meaning. Vocabulary items are memorized as lists and tested in gap filling exercises, which are not functional.

In this prototypical approach to language teaching, grammar and words have been extracted from texts. Removed from contexts, the grammar and words no longer resemble parts of texts. Nor do they function as parts of texts. Nor are they practiced as parts of texts. As isolated text elements they do not suffice for learners to reassemble into texts.

Change in language teaching methods

Language teaching since the 1960's has changed in response to the need to redesign teaching to achieve communication as a general goal of instruction. With communication as the goal for language teaching, the structural approach made no sense. Why dismantle discourse into separate elements in order to reassemble them for communication? The focus on communication drew attention to the need to redefine language learning outcomes in terms of communicative purposes. This was for practical reasons so that learners as transit laborers, migrants, or refugees could achieve a functional knowledge of a language in as short a time as possible to be able to communicate and work in new communities. Changes to teaching and curriculum have been a reaction to the shortcomings of the traditional structural approach to instruction. A summary of changes is set out in the following table. The analysis is a commentary on teaching languages for communicative purposes.

Table 1: Summary of changes in language teaching approaches since the 1960's

Teaching approach	Features	Analysis
Grammatical	Grammar & words out of context	Language items & exercises without meaning
Situational language	Contrived dialogues in pretend situations	Dialogues unnatural, written sentences
Audio-visual & audio-lingual	Simulated dialogues with slides & recordings	Repetitive imitation of artificial dialogues
Communicative	Authentic texts & communicative phrases but grammar focus	Focus on meanings for communication but also fictitious conversations
Task-based	Language for performing tasks	Inconsistency of relationship of language to tasks; pretend roles & tasks
Genre-based	Authentic models of genres in context	Linguistic focus on components of genre
Text-based	Authentic text-types for experience of texts in social practices	Social purpose of texts is focus for analysis of lexico-grammar

One of the first methods which attempted to re-contextualize grammar and vocabulary, in Australia at least, was situational language teaching. The method devised artificial dialogues for predictable contexts such as service encounters in banks and shops. The written dialogues

consisted of sentences, which were learned by repetition. The next change—audio-visual and audio-lingual method—utilized technology and exemplified behaviorist theory of learning. It required learners to repeat written, recorded artificial dialogues illustrated with stereotypical slides. Both methods added spoken language to the syllabus, recognizing the importance of speech in communication. But the spoken dialogues did not resemble natural conversation—they were a series of formal phrases or sentences, for example ‘What is your name? My name is Peter.’

The next approach, language teaching, emphasized learning by using the language, which included communicative speaking in class and working with authentic texts such as, signs and menus. The approach has variations and contradictions. For example, the aim of a curriculum might be to develop communicative skills, but major tests assess grammatical knowledge or the manipulation of grammatical items. For foreign language learners, schools and lessons were regarded as non-natural contexts for target language use, so simulations became popular with learners pretending to visit Japan and imagining eating sushi in a Japanese restaurant. Communication was reduced to mouthing questions and responses pre-packaged in textbooks with multimedia resources.

Currently, task-based teaching is a favored approach. It analyses tasks and identifies language needed to perform specified tasks. Unfortunately, in practice, the tasks are often mock performances with tasks devised for language rehearsal. The analysis of the language of tasks assumes a predictable relationship between the grammar and the language needed to perform tasks. However, in natural language use, tasks are performed with different discourse selections due to speakers’ preferences, proficiency, and purposes.

At present genre-based teaching is growing in influence. The focus of this approach is on spoken and written genres, using authentic examples as models. The grammar of the texts is analyzed as functional for realization of the social purposes of texts. In some applications of genre teaching, the analysis of the linguistic elements comprising texts dominates with a consequent neglect of the social purposes of texts.

Restoration of grammar to texts

The pattern of change outlined above is one of remediation, restoring grammar to texts and contexts. Each approach adds elements to the original grammatical analysis to recreate discourse for communication. The additions to the linguistic items include situations, speech acts, dialogues, realia or authentic texts, functions and notions, culture, genre, and tasks. Each modification has been an attempt to reconstruct language for communication. However, the changes are remedial rather than fundamental. The analysis of language as linguistic objects, and the theory of language learning as learning the language system, fails to make the distinction between linguistic study and communicative use of language. This has become increasingly

apparent with global pressure to use languages for specific purposes. With the exception of genre teaching, changes have been at the surface level, with instruction, teaching materials and tests maintaining the discrete treatment of language apart from contexts.

Text-based teaching for learners of additional languages

Text-based teaching conceptualizes language as a human resource for making meanings. Teaching is characterized by natural language use. Teachers choose texts relevant to learners' purposes. They select texts of interest to learners and of significance for fulfillment of the purposes of a program. They discuss and argue about ideas for pleasure and for work. In contrast, with senseless grammatical exercises and meaningless dialogues in structural teaching, teachers and students make sense with texts. Teaching projects learners into reacting to texts for purposes of understanding meanings, of contributing to meaning-making, and of expanding capacity to express meanings. The approach enables learners of additional languages to use a target language in ways familiar to them—with texts which are authentic, purposeful, and functional. I have described in the following sections practical and theoretical reasons for text-based curriculum design and teaching.

1. Familiarity with texts

Teachers and students are familiar with language used in texts, whether as spoken dialogues or reading blogs. When seeing or hearing texts, people are accustomed to interrogating them in order to make sense of them. Prior experiences prepare learners for working with texts in many ways. They recognize multiple text types and their purposes as a first step to comprehension and use. They know spoken language requires responses or attention—an answer, an action, a question, or a physical response. They understand that texts or discourses vary according to what is going on. They interact with texts. The contexts, visuals, and formats of texts enable recognition and assists interpretation.

2. Making sense of texts from the beginning

Learners' familiarity with certain texts—their purposes and contexts of use—positions them to make meanings from texts in a target language from the commencement of a program. From the first lesson the selection of familiar text types takes advantage of prior knowledge of texts. Learners use language normally and experience the satisfaction in making sense of texts from the outset. The authentic language is situated in contexts for use. Multimodal texts and multisensory (spoken, written, illustrated) presentation of texts enhances comprehension, memorization, and learning.

3. Use of language for real purposes in lessons

Texts enable lessons to be used for real purposes. Classrooms are sites for authentic communication. Simulated dialogues and pretend personalities are replaced by reading for information, speaking to get a task done, researching texts for sharing with others and listening to stories and novels and plays and poems for pleasure. For teachers with oral competence to manage the business of lessons in a target language the obvious application is talking in class, discussing work, recounting experiences, and interrogating texts. Not all teachers have the oral confidence to conduct class proceedings in the target language, in which case focusing on written texts, tweeted texts, and recorded texts is a basis for purposeful use of language. This extends to reading literature, with the selection of texts of interest, relevance and length for readers to achieve satisfaction, whether reading for information or for enjoyment.

4. Tailoring texts to class communities

A class is a community, which can be compared to other specific purpose speech communities with characteristic discourses and literacy practices. Teaching objectives correspond to the function and purpose of the speech community. In a science class it is the language of science, of experimentation, and of reporting experiments (Mickan 2007). In a general language class it is the language of management, content instruction, lesson activities, and collaboration. In the selection of texts, a teacher exploits her preferences and experiences to express personal expertise. In such classes there is scope for use of texts, which relate to program objectives and challenge students' involvement in debates, in sharing and in fun.

5. Make meanings for beginner to advanced classes

Learners' frustration with traditional language teaching was the delay in using the language in a sensible way which transcended mouthing phrases and repeating lists of colors, days of the week and numbers, which were nonsensical. Texts are accessible for reading, for action, and for information at all age levels and proficiency levels. Reading illustrated story and information books engages preschoolers as they listen to the reading of the text and to accompanying music, and look at illustrations together with the written text. Or they recite together—choral readings of poems and jazz chants energize classes at all levels. Texts for older students are chosen for specific purposes such as study tours, which relate to touring plans and entertainment and other social activities. For advanced university studies, texts selected for content-based instruction relate to discipline-specific knowledge and skills. Being read to, working out the meanings of a text, and constructing a text together all contribute to experiences of making meanings.

6. Language awareness: analysis of the lexico-grammar of texts

The approach to teaching grammar is through the analysis of texts. Texts are functional in different contexts for realization of different purposes. The detailed study of the wording of texts is situated and contextualized. Since grammar and vocabulary function together in texts, these are referred to as lexico-grammar. The analysis of lexico-grammar is concerned with the functional analysis of texts. Analysis reveals how through selective wording the specific functions of a text are realized. The linguistic analysis is directed at the purposes of a text. The idea is to build learners' awareness of how wordings and meanings are interconnected: a change in the choice of words changes the meaning potential for a listener or reader. The objective is for learners to understand how to make language choices in the composition of texts for the creation of different meanings.

7. Extensive reading and reading clubs

Extensive reading is a practical strategy for text-based instruction. Individual students, groups of students or whole classes access a variety of books, magazines or selected databases and websites for selection of reading materials. In one primary school the teacher of Modern Greek invited a bookseller to display a wide selection of books for children to review and to make selections for the school library. In another study, Kim (2006) purchased over fifty books based on his own interests and after observing young adults selecting books. He introduced the books to his Cram School and recorded the dramatic increase in children's reading. Extensive reading involves readers selecting what they read, keeping a record of what they have read, and commenting on or responding to what they have read. In silent-sustained reading students have time in class for reading chosen texts without interruption. Another strategy is whole class reading of a chosen novel or stories with the teacher reading aloud and students reading along and listening to the text. Reading groups or clubs formed voluntarily of adults have become popular. They serve a social purpose for people to gather to talk about a book. The attention is on the meanings of what has been read and on reactions to what has been read. Discussion is not on comprehension questions. Students might form their own reading clubs. The teacher also models reading, talking about, and writing comments on books.

8. Learner autonomy

Texts release students from dependency on a textbook or teacher's directions. They have opportunities to select texts out of interest and to read them at leisure for pleasure or information. Many students already access and create texts independently in chat rooms, in emails and in other social networking sites. Doing the same with target language texts extends their

experiences of texts and enables them to work with texts beyond the boundaries of programs and the borders of classrooms.

9. Integrated skills and multimodality

Text-based instruction integrates spoken and written language as in natural language use. It is normal for people to combine reading and writing, just as listening and speaking occur together. As I write this text, I am also reading and reviewing what I have read, sometimes aloud. Therefore it is surprising that language programs teach skills separately. Working with texts integrates the skills to take advantage of multisensory text experiences to enhance memorizing language.

Teaching practices

Texts are part of our social environments and human relationships, so learners are attuned to recognition of texts, to working with texts, and to learning with texts, and they expect texts to make meaning. The aim of teaching is to immerse students in experiences with texts in order to reflect the richness of students’ everyday experiences of texts. The teacher’s role is to select and sequence texts for planned and direct instruction for a class to learn the texts for participation in the class community and the community they aspire to beyond schooling. Programming involves selection of texts for students’ participation in targeted language practices specific to students’ purposes for learning the language. The main idea is for students to work to understand relevant texts, to respond to texts, and to express meanings in texts. The activities based on texts include observing texts in action, reacting to texts, analyzing texts, and composing texts.

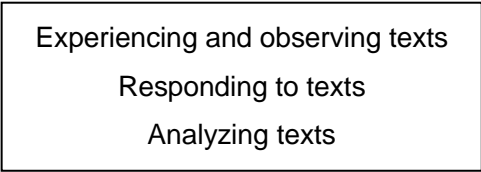


Diagram 1: Working with texts

Experiencing and observing texts

A class is a community with ongoing opportunities to observe texts used functionally. Texts are situated in contexts. The teacher as text is a model for students to observe target language in action in many different ways—use of the target language for class management, for lesson organization, for teaching content, and for social relationships. The teacher is a reading

teacher, a writing teacher, and a conversing teacher. The teacher explains the purposes of texts and their function in social practices. Students observe texts in action in order to experience the function of texts in contexts of use.

As well as providing students with text-rich activities in lessons, the teacher raises awareness of the wordings of text types. Teachers select text types for focused instruction. Students view and listen to written and spoken text types, with the teacher drawing attention to the form, structure, and wording, which characterize particular text types. Learners need multiple experiences of a text type introduced for the first time; with a focus on the way the text type functions as part of social practices.

Responding to texts

In traditional teaching learners' experiences of authentic texts were limited. In text-based instruction the aim from the beginning is to build students' discourse resources for textualizing meanings by working with texts. Teaching with texts integrates language skills or modes, so that a text selected to stimulate discussion is read aloud by the teacher, while students listen to and read the written script. When a text type has been selected for instruction, the teacher reads with the students several examples of the text type. The text is the stimulus for comment, discussion, and argumentation. The wording of a text is examined and examples composed together to support students' composition of texts.

Analysis of the language of texts

The analysis of grammar is as functional components of texts. Through the observation and analysis of many texts students recognize texts and their functions. They analyze authentic instances of texts as preparation for the formulation of their own texts. The teacher's task is to guide students' recognition of distinctive features of texts and the different functions of texts. Together teachers and students analyze text types selected for building students' discourse resources. They examine the distinctive structure and lexico-grammar of texts. These vary from text type to text type according to social and cultural function. The analysis of wording reveals relationships of wording to function, so an invitation is written differently from a recipe, or a letter of complaint, or a response to an article.

Composing texts

The communicative goal of language programs requires students to apply their knowledge of the wording of texts in the expression of meanings in conversation and in composition. The study of text types prepares students to make language selections for joint and

for individual compositions. They apply text analysis to the language choices they make for talking together and for composing texts. Students gain knowledge of the lexico-grammar of texts so that they express meanings in the kinds of texts they produce, whether personal or technical.

Theoretical framework: Language as social semiotic

The process for learning to mean begins very early in life and continues throughout life. It is a social process of communication amongst and with members of communities of practices. We learn language through participation in language practices, both as observers and as contributors. Although people use a variety of resources for making meanings, in many spheres of life language is a vital resource for meaning making. Education is an example in which instruction, tasks and texts depend on language use.

Text-based instruction is based on Halliday's (1978) theory of language as social semiotic; that is language is a resource with which people make meanings. People's use of language is as texts. Language use is situated in contexts. Language as a system is organized functionally so that instances of use relate to what is going on in contexts and who is involved. From many encounters with language people build potential for understanding and for expression of meanings in many texts. People learn to select wordings from the language system to realize purposes in contexts. They word and structure texts through selections from the language system to form text types for the expression of meanings. And they distinguish texts types to determine the functions of texts in contexts.

The concept of language as a resource, with which people make meanings, makes explicit a theory for language learning—learning language is learning to mean. Hasan (2004) wrote that “[a]cts of meaning call for someone who ‘means’ and someone to whom that meaning is meant: there is a ‘meaner’, some ‘meaning’ and a ‘meant to’” (p. 33). Language teachers are engaged in a normal, constant, and natural process of meaning making with students.

The semiotics of learning additional languages

In terms of social semiotics, the learning of additional languages is learning to mean with new language resources, but building on known discourses and texts. Learners expect to mean because this is their experience of language. Language learners know much about actual language use from their initial language experiences. This familiarity is the basis for learning new languages through engagement with texts.

Language learners expect to work with authentic texts to express meanings and to share meanings so they can participate in community practices with language. We underestimate the capacity of learners to engage with texts, and we undervalue the relevance of the first language experiences of learners to work with texts in an additional language. The challenge is to

apply text-based curriculum design and pedagogy to teaching languages in different contexts and systematically to document and to share the experiences.

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